

POONA UNIVERSITY

CONVOCATION ADDRESS

by

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POONA

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I am grateful to the authorities of the Poona University, and particularly to its Vice-Chancellor, Prof. D.A. Dabholkar, for inviting me to deliver this convocation address. I have accepted the invitation in great humility because I deem it to be a great honour and a proud privilege.

Poona is one of the leading universities in India. It is indeed creditable that it has raised itself to this pre-eminent position, in spite of its comparatively young age and in spite of severe financial and other odds. This is largely due to the farsighted vision of its founders, the able guidance of several distinguished vice-chancellors, the dedicated efforts of its teachers and students, and to the great tradition of learning in Poona which goes back to several hundred years. With these great and valuable assets, and with generous support from the University Grants Commission and the State Government to which you are fully entitled and which you richly deserve, I have no doubt that you will make still greater and more rapid progress in the days ahead and soon become one of the great universities of this country.

The theme I propose to discuss on this occasion is that of *universal elementary education in India* for children in the age-group 6-14. I would like to discuss why this programme, which all regard as that of the highest priority, is still not making adequate progress and suggest an alternative approach which may help us to implement it effectively in the foreseeable future.

II

The principle that liberal education is the right of every individual is comparatively of recent origin. In our ancient

tradition, liberal education of the higher level (where the medium was generally Sanskrit for Hindus and Arabic or Persian for Muslims) was confined only to a small minority of the upper or sacred castes or classes. Even elementary liberal education was confined to a small class of upper social strata (about one to five per cent of the children in the age-groups 5-15), mostly boys. For the remaining children, vocational education, learnt in a non-formal manner through apprenticeship or active participation was considered adequate. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, therefore, there were innumerable small elementary schools in almost all towns and villages, but they enrolled only between one to five per cent of the children of school-going age and the percentage of literacy among the adults was only about three per cent (about six per cent among men and almost negligible among women). The enlightened educated Indians who saw the provision of universal liberal education in the advanced countries of the West, and interpreted it as the most important contributory factor to their power and prosperity, were impressed with the need to provide a minimum liberal education to all children in India. A demand to this effect was first put forward by Dadabhai Naoroji before the Indian Education Commission (1882). Gokhale moved, first a resolution, and then a Bill, in the Central Legislature demanding compulsory education of four years for all children (1910-12). These efforts failed; but they led to the passing of compulsory education Acts in all parts of India for providing four or five years liberal education to all children (1918-31).

Mahatma Gandhi added a very important new dimension to this demand. He did not like the traditional dichotomy between liberal and vocational education and was of the view that good education was an integrated combination of liberal and vocational education and that an education of seven or eight years (equivalent in content to the old matriculation *minus* English *plus* craft) should be provided to every child.

It is in this context that we must interpret Article 45 of the Constitution. It was a fulfilment of a deep and sacred national yearning pursued for over 70 years to provide good

education—both liberal and vocational—to every child, irrespective of caste, colour, race, religion or sex.

III

The design the framers of our Constitution had in view was as simple as it was magnificent. They knew that political power, knowledge, and wealth were very unequally distributed in the society and that these imbalances had to be redressed if the new society they had set their hearts on—a society based on freedom, equality, justice and dignity of the individual—had to be created. They therefore introduced a three-fold package deal in the Constitution :

- They introduced adult franchise, equality for women ; and certain special protection measures for the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes for a better redistribution of political power ;
- They directed that the State should strive to provide free and compulsory education to all children till they attain the age of 14 years so as to secure a better redistribution of knowledge.
- They also directed that the State should strive to provide the minimum essential standard of living to the people and to prevent concentration of economic power in a few persons or groups to achieve a better distribution of economic power.

This was treated as a package because the distribution of political power, knowledge and economic power is obviously inter-dependent and because a simultaneous attempt for redistribution has to be made on all the three fronts to achieve worthwhile and early results. Its main weakness however lay in not placing an equal emphasis on the three processes. The first set of political changes could be introduced by legislation. They therefore became immediately effective and succeeded considerably as is shown by the political maturity of the electorate evidenced in our recent elections. But the other two programmes did not receive an equal emphasis. Not being

amenable to a mere legislative remedy, they were left to the good sense of the Governments that would be in power from time to time. The Constitution makers of course hoped that these objectives would have the top-most priority in the programmes of the Governments because they owe their existence, in the last analysis, to the vote of the *Daridranarayana* of India.

IV

I am mainly concerned, in this address with the second of these three programmes, namely, the provision of free and compulsory education for all children in the age-group 6-14. Here, let me say that we have made considerable progress in the last 30 years but our failures are even more glaring. Our best achievement is the provision of facilities: there is now a primary school (classes I-V) within walking distance from the home of nearly 97 per cent of the children. More than half the children also have a middle school (classes VI-VIII) within easy distance of their homes. Anyway, it does not appear difficult to provide a school, teaching classes I-VII or I-VIII, within a walking distance from the home of every child and the goal may be reached in five to ten years. Even in the matter of enrolment of children, we have made considerable headway: the total enrolment in classes I-V is now 68 million and that in classes VI-VIII about 18 million. It may also be said that about 86 children out of every 100 do enter schools at present. Those who do not enter at all are mostly girls and the children of weaker sections of the community like scheduled castes and tribes or landless agricultural labourers. The task undone, however, is very difficult and supreme efforts would be needed to bring into schools these children who form the hard core of poverty and deprivation. Unfortunately, our greatest weakness is in retention: Of every 100 children enrolled in schools, only 50 reach class V and only 25 reach class VIII. In other words, our education is somewhat effective only for half the children and fully effective only for one-fourth. This huge wastage makes our educational system most inefficient. What is worse, the rate of reduction in wastage is so slow—less than

five per cent in a decade—that there is little scope of fulfilling the directive of Article 45 of the Constitution in the near future. This was to have been fulfilled by 1960. We first revised the target date to 1966, then to 1976, and now to 1986. But even the last target date seems to be unachievable, and some State plans talk of 2010 or even 2030 as the probable year of reaching this goal.

Why have we failed in this important national goal? The most common reasons given are two: sudden and large increase in population and lack of resources. While I recognize the significance of these issues, I would like to point out that we must achieve our goal in spite of them. In fact, the spread of education among the people, and especially among women, can be the most powerful instrument of promoting family planning itself, as the experience of Kerala has now shown. Secondly, we cannot wait till we are rich to provide education to our people. In fact, to give good education to the people can in itself be a powerful method of reducing poverty. The less we talk of these excuses in future, the better for all concerned.

The real reasons for the failure, in my opinion, are five. The first is the decision to separate education of adults from that of children. We have accorded the lowest priority to adult education, spread of literacy, or even non-formal adult education which receives less than one per cent of total educational expenditure. Now it is well-known that a literate parent, and especially a literate woman, is the most effective method of ensuring that the children receive education; and cases of non-enrolment or wastage are extremely few in the literate or educated families. It is therefore obvious that our programme of providing universal education to children must go hand in hand with that of educating the adults, formally or informally. What we now assume is that a child which, for some reason, escapes school or fails to become literate (and the proportion of such children is about 40 to 50 per cent) has no option but to live and die as an illiterate and condemned individual. There is no justification for such an inhuman and wasteful approach to the solution of the problem.

The second reason for our failure is the wrong tool we are using to spread education among the masses. Our existing system of elementary education has a single point of entry (class I at the age of about 5 or 6), sequential promotions from class to class at the end of each year, and an obligation on children to put in full-time attendance. It also uses only full-time professional teachers which adds tremendously to its cost. What is worse, it is mostly a bookish system without adequate involvement of children in socially useful productive work so that it tends to perpetuate white-collar attitude. What we are trying to do is to extend this middle-class-oriented system to the society as a whole. Such an attempt cannot succeed; and even if it does, it can only end in a disaster. We must therefore realize that we need a radical transformation of this educational system before it becomes possible or desirable to make it universal. We must have multiple entry points and children who have missed education should be encouraged and assisted to begin it at any later date that may be convenient to them. There should be no rigidity about annual promotions from class to class and grown-up children who begin their education late should be helped to complete their studies in as short a time as possible. There should be no insistence on full-time attendance and children who work should be taught in such time as they can spare. Instead of saying, as we do at present, that children will either learn on a full-time basis or go without education altogether, we must say that all children shall learn, on a full-time basis, if possible and on a part-time basis, if necessary. We must also transform the content of education by introduction of activities, work-experience, etc. so that the schools train for work as well as for leisure and culture and their power to attract and hold children is considerably increased. Finally, we must abandon our exclusive emphasis on full-time, professional teachers and use all the teaching resources available in the community.

The third important reason for our failure is non-involvement of the people. In the post-independence period, we have shown an over-dependence on the bureaucracy and used it as almost the sole instrument of promoting development.

Universal elementary education, for instance, has been left solely to the primary school teachers and inspectors. Bureaucracy is necessary and has no doubt an important role to play in all development programmes. But development is also a political issue; and developmental programmes like universal elementary education, which affect every family and almost every individual, are essentially political and cannot be handled by bureaucracy alone. To awaken parents to realize the value of education, to prepare them to make the sacrifices for the purpose, to sweep children into schools in a mass movement, to galvanize communities into action, to make schools more meaningful, to tap community resources for educational purposes, and to create and maintain a mass movement without which such massive and mass-oriented programmes do not succeed, is essentially a political task and has to be attempted on a political basis. All this becomes particularly relevant when the programme is to be implemented, not in a gradualistic style spread over generations, but is a blitzkrieg spread over a few years. Unless we realize this and take the necessary steps, the chances of the programme succeeding are rather bleak.

The further major reason for failure is our inability to improve the living standards of the masses. A programme of universal education cannot be built on the basis of abject poverty or in conditions of inhuman existence. A programme of eradicating poverty ought therefore to have been accorded the highest priority and developed side by side with that of universal elementary education. But this was not done. Whether from the point of view of employment or increasing incomes, or making more and better health services available, the conditions of the vast masses of people have shown little improvement, if any; and there is little possibility of the schemes of educational expansion succeeding under such circumstances. The programmes of elimination of poverty and of providing universal elementary education must go hand in hand.

The fifth important reason for the failure of the programme is the cooling down in the missionary zeal of the educated

intelligentsia. Prior to 1947, the educated people of this country showed an unparalleled enthusiasm for improving the lot of the common people, partly due to the influence of Mahatma Gandhi, and partly to the need to take the poor along with them in the struggle against an alien power. Unfortunately, a sea-change came over these attitudes in the post-independence period. The educated classes of India and other elite groups, who then came into power, were now more interested in their own advancement and in their own welfare than in the well-being of the masses; and an era of 'input' (what do I give to my people and to my country?) was succeeded by an era of 'output' (what can I get from my people and my country?). There are two things which I dislike most about the educated Indian: one is his arrogance and contempt for the common man of India because he has not received formal education, although he may be more cultured and wise; and the second is his total indifference to the suffering and poverty around them. I have seen these two weaknesses in their worst forms in the last 30 years. It is obvious that a major programme for the development of the common people like the provision of universal elementary education cannot succeed in such an environment.

V

Assuming that the above analysis is correct, where do we go from here or what programme of action can we recommend? I would like to make a few concrete proposals for the consideration of all concerned in this context.

(1) Let us remember that the best way to solve this problem of universal elementary education is to attack it on a war-footing and to solve it within a short period, say, of ten years. Long-term programmes defeat their own purpose because the momentum slows down, population increases and costs go up. We must, therefore, determine that we shall solve this problem within the next ten years, by 1986 at the latest as recommended by the Education Commission.

(2) We must make a beginning at once by modifying our formal system of elementary education with the introduction

of multiple-entry and part-time schools, and use of non-professional teachers. There should be every encouragement for children who begin in class I at the age of 5 or 6 and proceed ahead by doing one class every year. As a supplement to this, there should be special part-time classes for children who begin later in the age-group 9-11 or 11-14; and these children should be allowed to complete their education upto class V in a short period of 12 to 24 months. The educational system should maintain a contact with each child in the age-group 6-14, either on a full-time or on a part-time basis.

(3) The content and methodology of elementary education will have to be totally changed. It should be built, not round mere transmission of inert knowledge as the present system is, but round work-experience and programmes of development and community service. It should have a relevance to the life in the community which should show improvement because of education. In other words, it is highly wasteful to run education and development as two separate systems. It would be far economical and effective to run these two together as a single integrated system; education leading to development and development, in its turn, leading to further and better education.

(4) We should develop the whole programme as a mass movement in which the poor people and hundreds of volunteers from among the educated work together in the joyous adventure of sharing knowledge and building up the country. It should be organised, not so much on the basis of a paid mercenary service of professionals, however competent, but on the basis of a large-scale use of committed and enthusiastic voluntary workers.

(5) I would suggest that large-scale experiments should be started in not less than two community development blocks in each district where intensive efforts should be made to bring every child in the age-group 6-14 under instruction within a period of not more than five years. There should be a house-to-house census of all children in the area and a concrete programme should be drawn up, separately for each community,

under which every child shall be educated in the best possible manner, either in formal or non-formal education. The experience gained in experiments of this type will be extremely valuable and it should be possible to generalize it to cover all parts of the country during the Sixth Five Year Plan.

A programme of this type will undoubtedly need full Government support and large financial investment. But it will also need something which is even more important, namely, the organisation of a mass movement for educational expansion and improvement and the services of millions of young men and women who are committed to the development of the country and determined to wipe out the stigma of ignorance, ill-health and poverty. I don't think that this is something which is beyond us if we have the necessary will.

VI

To the young men and women who have received their degrees and distinctions today, I offer warm felicitations. I wish them a long and purposeful life in the service of their country. They are completing their education and going out in the wide world at a very critical time when the country needs the voluntary and dedicated services of thousands and thousands of young persons for providing educational, health and other services to the people. The heavy public investment in this university would be justified if a significant proportion of them can take up these tasks of nation building.

J A I H I N D